

## Sources of Change in United States–United Nations Relations



*Lise Morjé Howard*

*Since the end of the Cold War, relations between the United States and the UN have oscillated between periods of friendship and friction. What accounts for the major changes in US-UN relations, especially in the realm of multilateral peace operations? This article argues that the two most significant turning points have come after the unexpected deaths of Americans: first, in Somalia when the William J. Clinton administration moved away from multilateral cooperation in UN peace operations, and, second, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that served to drive the George W. Bush administration in the other direction, toward the UN. In both instances, the administrations changed their positions from staunch multilateralism or unilateralism toward moderation. Under the Barack Obama administration, we can likely expect a continuation of moderate multilateralism. KEYWORDS: United Nations, United States, peacekeeping, multilateralism.*

OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, US-UN RELATIONS HAVE OSCILLATED between periods of friendship and friction. What are the sources of major changes in relations between the US and UN, especially in the realm of multilateral peacekeeping? Do changes in the US presidential administration, Congress, public opinion, or external events drive collaboration or dissonance in the relationship? If one surveys the recent trends, most often it is not a change in US presidential leadership that ushers in major relationship changes, even if we might expect that transitions between presidential parties would cause a change. In fact, the major shifts have taken place *within* administrations. Although the US Congress is often seen as a source of friction because it generally is not supportive of the UN, this condition is underlying and fairly consistent, so it alone does not explain change. Similarly, there has not been a wide fluctuation in public opinion over the past twenty years—Americans are supportive of the UN, but generally do not think that it is doing a good job.<sup>1</sup> Changes in the individual US ambassador to the UN can sometimes play a role in easing or creating friction in the relationship, based on the diplomatic skills of the individual, although often not significantly.

The two most significant changes in recent history have come after the deaths of Americans. The first was under President William J. Clinton's administration, with the "Black Hawk down" tragedy in Somalia in October

1993. The deaths of nineteen US Rangers were interpreted as indicators of policy failure and, thus, a need to change course away from multilateral cooperation in peace operations and the UN. The second major change came in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and was reinforced by the faltering war in Iraq. These events served to drive President George W. Bush's administration in the other direction, toward the UN and increased multilateralism—contrary to popular perception—especially in the realm of peace operations.

Today, in the wake of increasing pressure to intervene in fragile states and the global nature of many security problems, what can we expect of US-UN relations under President Barack Obama? Will the United States and the UN grow closer and work more together, or will the relationship continue to look as it did toward the end of George W. Bush's presidency?

In this article, I will first outline a typological continuum of UN-related multilateralism and unilateralism in US administrations since the end of the Cold War. I will then examine the major shifts over the past twenty years of US-UN relations, focusing on issues related to collective security and peacekeeping. Finally, I offer an assessment about what we have seen, and what we may expect to see in US-UN relations under President Obama. I argue that, while presidential attitudes toward multilateralism and the UN tend to be extreme during campaigns and early in administrations, after the shock of unanticipated American deaths, US policies concerning collective security, peacekeeping, and multilateral action in US-UN relations have moderated toward the middle. Given how far President George W. Bush had swung in the multilateral direction by the end of his second term, and the current moderate views toward the UN and multilateral cooperation in the Obama administration, we will most likely continue to see more of the same rather than a radical change unless there is another shock involving American deaths.

### **A Typological Continuum of US Multilateralism and Unilateralism**

*Multilateralism* not merely refers to the nominal form of “coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states,” but also has a qualitative dimension.<sup>2</sup> The qualitative dimension relates to principles that order relations among states. In the realm of security, the central organizing principle is “collective security,” wherein states coordinate security arrangements against an unknown enemy in defense of an unknown victim.<sup>3</sup> Diffuse, rather than direct, reciprocity characterizes interactions between the states. John Ruggie further elaborates:

The American vision as to what constitutes a desirable world order has been clear and consistent [since Woodrow Wilson's presidency] and it embodies certain key multilateral principles: movement toward greater openness,

greater nondiscrimination of treatment, and more extensive opportunities to realize joint gains.<sup>4</sup>

Multilateralism involves a commitment to both multilateral processes and multilateral outcomes.

Collective security was the main purpose behind creating the UN, and many new security threats today tend to be referred to the UN. Indeed, peacekeeping has become the most significant activity overall in the UN, with larger budgets and more personnel than any other UN endeavor by far. As Shashi Tharoor explains, “The United Nations is the preeminent institution of multilateralism. It provides a forum where sovereign states can come together to share burdens, address common problems, and seize common opportunities.”<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, threats to US security interests—terrorism, fragile states, poverty, international crime, climate change, natural disasters, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS and influenza—are of a sort that cannot easily be combated by the United States alone or through bilateral agreements.<sup>6</sup>

One can think of US administrations’ attitudes toward multilateralism and the UN along a continuum with four points. Table 1 illustrates where, at Point 1, we find unilateralists who seek to disengage with the UN; at Point 2, unilateralists who engage with the UN for the sole purpose of furthering US foreign policy interests; at Point 3, multilateralists who are somewhat interested in furthering common interests, but who are more concerned with US interests; and, at the furthest point, multilateralists who are more global minded and see multilateral engagement as a central US interest.

Before taking the reins as US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton and Susan Rice could be viewed as standing at opposite ends of the spectrum based on their prior writings and speeches. Bolton was famously

**Table 1 Continuum of US Unilateralism and Multilateralism**

1. Unilateralism	2. Moderate Unilateralism	3. Moderate Multilateralism	4. Multilateralism
US policymakers seek disengagement; foreign policy is characterized by isolationism. (John Bolton 1998; George W. Bush 2000)	US policymakers engage with the UN for the purpose of furthering US interests. (John Bolton 2002; George W. Bush 2001; William J. Clinton Mar. 1999)	Policymakers engage with the UN to further common interests, but mainly US interests. (Madeleine Albright; William J. Clinton Nov. 1993; George H. W. Bush; Susan Rice 2010; George W. Bush 2008; Barack Obama 2008)	Multilateralism—through UN interactions—is a central US interest. (Susan Rice 2006; Thomas Pickering; William J. Clinton 1992)

quoted as having said that the UN Secretariat could lose the top ten of its floors and it “wouldn’t make a bit of difference.”<sup>7</sup>

Over time, however, Bolton moved to moderate his stance, given the perceived needs of the George W. Bush administration in the wake of 9/11 and the faltering war in Iraq, and ended his term at the UN in the moderate unilateralist category as it became clear that the war on terror could not be fought by the United States alone. Richard Haass, former director of policy planning at the Department of State, explains that after 9/11 and several years of faltering efforts in Iraq, “in most instances unilateralism is neither wise nor sustainable.”<sup>8</sup> In general, the Bush administration sought more multilateral engagement with the UN than Bolton had proposed at the outset, overseeing and funding the largest expansion of peacekeeping activities in the UN’s history as explained further below.

Since January 2009, the United States has had a new ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, who could be placed in the far multilateral category wherein multilateral engagement with the UN is seen as a core US interest. For example, she has advocated in earlier publications on behalf of humanitarian intervention and ending world poverty.<sup>9</sup> But since assuming office, given the more unilateral pressures from Congress, the Department of Defense, and other members of President Obama’s cabinet, her recent statements align more with the moderate multilateral category.

The tendency to move toward the middle ground between purely unilateral and multilateral action has arisen after some important shifts in US-UN relations over the past twenty years. In the following section, I outline some of the major shifts as well as the two major shocks that produced the most change.

### **Historical Origins of US-UN Policy, and the Administrations of George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton**

The United States was one of the major forces behind the founding of the UN at the end of World War II. The first attempt at building an international organization to prevent war, the League of Nations, was led by President Woodrow Wilson after World War I, but rejected by unilateral, isolationist-minded members of Congress. Although the League came into existence, the US never joined. With the founding of the UN in San Francisco in 1945, the League of Nations was officially declared “dead” as the UN arose in its place. Charged with the purpose of saving “succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” the international, or multilateral-oriented forces, reigned for a time in US foreign policy making.<sup>10</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt and his successor Harry Truman, who was thrust into the presidency upon the death of Roosevelt, would probably fall into the fourth multilateralist category on the continuum outlined above. After witnessing World Wars I and II, Truman was

convinced that “mankind was going to destroy itself unless it invented some form of international organization to avoid conflict and advance the common humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

While the world held great hopes for the UN in international dispute mediation and resolution, during the Cold War, the UN was relegated to the sidelines of US foreign policy, and was further discredited in the United States when the General Assembly voted in 1975 to equate Zionism with racism. Peacekeeping, which would become the organization’s core activity after the Cold War, was effectively moribund: between 1978 and 1988, the UN did not launch a single new peacekeeping mission. The organization was caught in the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. And after several decades, though many were dedicated and intelligent people, UN staff had become even in the eyes of the Secretary-General, “bloated, slack, and out of touch.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, President George H. W. Bush proclaimed the new world order, which would be more democratic, open, and multilateral. “The UN was to be a central player in President Bush’s New World Order, especially as it related to peacekeeping.”<sup>13</sup> The Bush administration appointed a staunch supporter of multilateralism, Thomas R. Pickering, to serve as US ambassador to the UN. Bush had formerly held that position from 1971 to 1973, and had a sound knowledge of the organization and its potential. He led the United States, with the help of the UN, through a successful campaign in the Persian Gulf to rid Kuwait of Saddam Hussein’s military onslaught. The Bush presidency worked in tandem with the UN during the Gulf War, and contributed to the establishment of several important and eventually successful multidimensional peacekeeping operations in Mozambique, El Salvador, and Cambodia.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, the Bush administration could be placed along the third point of the continuum, in the moderate multilateral category.

Some argue that President Clinton’s UN policies were more multilaterally minded than those of President George H. W. Bush, but that he was hampered in his engagement with the UN because of the Republican Congress.<sup>15</sup> It is true that Clinton expressed some ideas during his first presidential campaign that would place him in the farthest multilateral category. But once he came into office, and especially after the Black Hawk down incident in October 1993, Clinton’s policies toward the UN reverted quickly to the middle, and even beyond, when his administration opted not to seek UN approval before the NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosovo.

In 1992 during Clinton’s first presidential campaign, he positioned himself on a firm multilateral platform, going so far as to endorse the creation of a UN rapid-reaction force—one that would engage in such activities as “preventing mass violence against civilian populations, providing humanitarian relief, and combating terrorism.”<sup>16</sup> But after winning the White House, tensions

within Clinton's administration concerning multilateralism and relations with the UN became more evident. On the one hand, Madeleine Albright, the US ambassador to the UN, began to forward a new policy of "assertive multilateralism" where the United States would increasingly rely on international institutions, rules, and partnerships in order to better address global problems, share burdens, win legitimacy, and help spread free-market democracy.<sup>17</sup> Assertive multilateralism would necessarily entail greater engagement with the UN, but with the fundamental priority of advancing US foreign policy goals.

However, on the other hand, Clinton's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell argued on behalf of even less engagement, especially concerning the participation of US troops in UN peacekeeping. Powell pronounced that "as long as I am chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I will not agree to commit American men and women to an unknown war, in an unknown land, for an unknown cause, under an unknown commander, for an unknown duration."<sup>18</sup> Powell's opposition was eventually joined by members in the State Department and Secretary of State Albright appeared to reverse her commitments to multilateralism, declaring that "multilateralism is a word for policy wonks, so let's not use it anymore."<sup>19</sup> But the trend away from multilateralism was indelibly reinforced ten months into the Clinton administration, when all talk of supporting the establishment of a UN rapid-reaction capacity or the idea of "the multilateral use of force" ceased.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1993, nineteen US soldiers were killed on the battlefield in Somalia and the body of one was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu before US television cameras during a botched attempt to capture warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid.<sup>21</sup> Although the US Operation Restore Hope operated separately from the parallel UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), and the UN was not even informed of the US mission to capture Aidid, the US military actively sought to blame the UN for its misfortunes. The failures in Somalia led to doubts about the ability of the UN to keep the peace. The first ever comprehensive statement on US policy toward multilateral peacekeeping operations, Presidential Decision Directive 25 issued in May 1994, sought to promote a more "selective and effective approach" to peacekeeping operations, which in the end accomplished the first objective, but certainly not the second.<sup>22</sup> The US sought to limit the scope and number of peacekeeping operations, and debates flared within the Clinton administration about how, when, and who might use force in order to stop civil wars. The uncertainty in part led to a succession of devastating peacekeeping failures as UN peacekeepers were ordered merely to observe the mass killings in Rwanda, Angola, and Srebrenica (in Bosnia and Herzegovina).<sup>23</sup> The peacekeeping failures worked to further fuel anti-UN sentiment within the United States, especially in Congress.

In November 1994—a full six months after Presidential Decision Directive 25 had been issued by Clinton—the Republicans won the majority in US

midterm congressional elections and initiated their Contract with America, including, among mainly domestic proposals, the National Security Restoration Act, which prohibited US troops from serving under UN command. As a means of trying to coerce UN reform, Congress refused to pay US dues to the UN. In turn, the US's debtor status and insistence on major reform proposals fed anti-US sentiment within the UN's Secretariat and General Assembly.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1996 presidential elections, the UN became a handy scapegoat for all that was going wrong in the world, and Republicans and Democrats alike began to verbally attack the organization. "Attacking the organization became a win-win bet . . . You could only win."<sup>25</sup> The United States then maneuvered, against the public wishes of every country in the world, to remove Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali from office.<sup>26</sup> Boutros-Ghali was seen as autocratic and cerebral, and spoke French better than English, none of which made him popular with the American public, the Clinton administration, or Congress.

Boutros-Ghali was replaced by Kofi Annan, who was well liked not only in the UN Secretariat, but also in the General Assembly, the Clinton administration, and even in the US Congress. Remarkably, Senator Jesse Helms, a staunch unilateralist, declared during a meeting with Annan: "Let there be no mistake about it, Mr. Secretary, I like you."<sup>27</sup> For almost two years, US-UN relations took an upswing.

The easing of relations did not last long, however. A new downswing developed when the United States decided not to seek a Security Council vote in March 1999 before initiating the NATO bombing of the Serbs in the Kosovo dispute. This was because the United States feared that its attempts to counteract ethnic cleansing in Kosovo would be vetoed by Russia (and possibly China, whose embassy in Serbia was bombed during the NATO air raids). But as David Malone explains, Kosovo was not the only issue of contention in the Security Council at the time:

P-5 [Permanent Five] cooperation in addressing challenges to international peace and security drew to a close in 1998 with Russia and China furiously objecting to US and UK bombing of Iraq, and Russia resisting a lead role for NATO in addressing the crisis in Kosovo. By late 1998, the council was deadlocked on these two key issues.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the controversial Iraq bombings, and the disagreement over Kosovo, the United States was apparently using the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) on Iraq as a cover for gathering exclusive US intelligence on Iraq, which upset not only the other members of the Security Council, but the Secretariat and the General Assembly. The United States subsequently lost a vote to renew its membership on the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the main budgetary committee in the UN system.

Meanwhile, the Republican-controlled Congress sought to undermine the UN and the Clinton administration by not confirming US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to the UN for one year, and by continuing not to pay US dues. By the end of the century, the US debt to the UN stood at about \$2 billion. The United States' own General Accounting Office warned that the US voting rights in the General Assembly would be revoked unless it paid its dues.

Continuing the up and down pattern, just as US-UN relations appeared to be at their nadir, things began to ease again. Russia, the United States, and China set aside their differences over NATO's military actions in Serbia and Kosovo in order to approve four new multidimensional UN peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and East Timor. The shift toward agreement was reinforced, but this time not by any changes in the world, the UN, or the US administration, but by media mogul Ted Turner. In fall 2000, Turner lamented that the whole world was upset with the United States for not paying its UN dues and, with much fanfare, he offered to pay \$1 billion of the back dues himself. His public actions worked to shame Congress into releasing the funds for the UN as stipulated by long-standing international treaties.<sup>29</sup> Congress and the executive branch eventually agreed to pay up dues in the Helms-Biden Act, which included a three-year plan to pay back funds, minus several million dollars that Congress, in keeping with its unilateralist stance, decided not to pay. A deal was also reached to lower US dues from 25 percent to 22 percent of the organization's annual administrative budget, and its assessment of peacekeeping operations from 31 percent to about 27 percent.

At the outset, President Clinton's overall approach to the UN was not radically different from that of the George H. W. Bush administration since both sought to engage in multilateral diplomacy, but with US interests as central and separate from concepts of broader, global interests. Both administrations could be placed in the moderate multilateralist position. Even though at the outset Clinton sought to advance enhanced multilateral security through cooperation with the UN, after the deaths of US troops in Somalia and the perceived policy failures of multilateral peacekeeping, his efforts at multilateral engagement fell off significantly.

### **The George W. Bush Administration: Unilateralism with an Uneven, but Definite, Trend Toward Multilateralism**

Whereas the deaths of US soldiers worked to drive the Clinton administration away from multilateral engagement with the UN toward a more moderate multilateral, and even unilateral, position out of fear of complicated entanglement in multilateral peacekeeping operations, the deaths of Americans on September 11, 2001, drove the George W. Bush administration away from the far unilateral position and toward greater multilateral engagement with the UN. Bush



sought engagement as a means of decreasing the number of failed states and thus diminishing the territory on which potential anti-US terrorists could train and plan. In both instances, the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations moderated their positions from either extreme of the multilateral-unilateral continuum toward the middle, in response to unexpected American deaths.

In the 2000 presidential election, Governor George W. Bush campaigned against multilateralism, nation building, and further engagement with the UN.<sup>30</sup> Once he was elected, his administration immediately made its unilateral intentions clear in numerous ways. It opposed ratification of many treaties: the Climate Change Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the biodiversity convention, the law of the sea convention, the landmines convention, and the International Criminal Court. It also made plans to build a missile defense system, which was in violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and was initially opposed to making AIDS drugs more widely available by allowing generic manufacturing. Even though the Bush administration publicly supported paying back UN dues, as of 15 June 2001 the United States still owed almost \$2 billion for past dues and then current assessments. World opposition to the US unilateral positions was vociferous. In May 2001, the United States was voted off the UN Human Rights Committee, presumably because of the Bush administration's unilateralism (votes are cast in secret). Hubert Vedrine, the French foreign minister, had already been talking about the United States as a "hyperpower," and the renewed unilateralism gave his charges weight.<sup>31</sup>

After the attacks of 9/11, the attitudes of George W. Bush toward the UN became somewhat erratic, veering between unilateralism and multilateralism, but overall the trend was toward greater multilateralism and greater cooperation with the UN. However, the largely unilateral war in Iraq overshadowed this cooperation, creating a general but unwarranted perception of "unilateralist overdrive," and many books were written lamenting the United States' increasing unilateralism.<sup>32</sup>

But at the same time, the United States sought greater participation in the UN. The day after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the UN Security Council voted to recognize the United States' right to self-defense in response to the attacks.<sup>33</sup> The George W. Bush administration requested membership, and was voted back on, the UN Human Rights Commission in spring 2002. Several months later, President Bush announced that the United States would rejoin the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), after having left the organization in 1984. The September 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States declared that "no nation can build a safer, better world alone," expressing one of the central features of multilateral security.<sup>34</sup>

While the George W. Bush administration appeared to be considering greater multilateral cooperation, its actions were often erratic. In President

Bush's September 2002 address to the UN General Assembly, he did not mention collective security or multilateral principles, opting again for the unilateral rhetoric: "We cannot stand by and do nothing while dangers gather. We must stand up for our security."<sup>35</sup> At the same time, however, the speech was largely made up of a list of all the Security Council resolutions that Iraq had violated. The speech was designed to inform the world that the United States was preparing for war in Iraq, but made the case based almost exclusively on resolutions of the Security Council, thus in some ways validating the legitimacy of the UN and the Security Council's decisions.

Continuing in the ambivalent vein, in fall 2002 the White House sought, and in a bipartisan vote the US Congress approved, to take "all means necessary" in Iraq, preparing the path for war and widening the gap between the United States and the UN.<sup>36</sup> But before starting the war, the United States tried to win UN approval by sending Secretary of State Colin Powell to the organization to argue the US case against Iraq. Proponents of the war argued that the UN ought to sign on so that it would not be seen as irrelevant in world affairs.<sup>37</sup> But this presented a dilemma for the UN: it could protest against the United States and appear weak (because the United States would do what it wanted anyway), or support it and appear weak (because it would be seen as beholden to US interests). When the UN Security Council and Secretariat did not initially approve of the US war in Iraq, the United States went to war without the consent of the UN—a most extreme unilateral move. But at least this time, unlike what the United States did in Kosovo under President Clinton, UN approval was sought.

Subsequently, although the United States seemed at times ambivalent about seeking UN approval and assistance with its war effort in Iraq, it eventually won both. The UN expanded its headquarters in Baghdad. But on 19 August 2003, the UN special representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and sixteen UN staff members were killed in a bomb attack on the UN compound in Baghdad.<sup>38</sup> The attack prompted not only UN member states, but also the Secretariat, to begin standing up more to the requests of the George W. Bush administration. The UN Staff Union voted to withdraw all UN staff from Iraq. In response, the Bush administration began to adopt a more conciliatory approach toward the UN.

In President George W. Bush's address to the 2003 UN General Assembly shortly after Vieira de Mello was killed, he declared:

Our actions in Afghanistan and Iraq were supported by many governments, and America is grateful to each one. I also recognize that some of the sovereign nations of this Assembly disagreed with our actions. Yet there was and there remains unity among us on the fundamental principles and objectives of the United Nations. We are dedicated to the defense of our collective security and to the advance of human rights. These permanent commitments call us to great work in the world, work we must do together.<sup>39</sup>

The United States' call to work together was not merely rhetoric. At the behest of the United States, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1483 on 22 May 2003, which requested that the UN play a significant role in establishing the infrastructure to hold Iraqi elections. The United States also increasingly put pressure on the UN to engage more politically in Iraq, for example, by seeking its diplomatic assistance in negotiating a way out of the impasse with Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani. In a show of goodwill, in fall 2003, the US Senate voted to pay back unpaid dues to the UN. And the George W. Bush administration in general began expressing a renewed interest in peacekeeping and stability operations, along with multilateral cooperation to fight terrorism.

But just as the multilateral train was gathering steam, the United States veered again toward more unilateral gestures in the wake of the oil-for-food scandal. The oil-for-food program was established in 1995 as a way to ensure that Iraq could import food, medicine, and other nonmilitary supplies by selling oil without violating international economic sanctions. By 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, it became abundantly clear that the UN-administered program had failed to stop surcharges, kickbacks, and corruption. Accusations were made, most vociferously on Fox News and by other conservative commentators, that skimmed profits were being used to buy influence at the UN, even with Secretary-General Annan (the charges against the Secretary-General proved unfounded). In the end, the US-initiated Independent Inquiry Committee led by former US Federal Reserve chair Paul Volcker found that oil smuggling was indeed Saddam Hussein's largest source of revenue; that the smuggling took place outside the purview and oversight of the UN; that the smuggling routes had been established long before the oil-for-food program came into existence; and that the lead administrator of the program, Benon Sevan of Cyprus, had accepted nearly \$150,000 in bribes.<sup>40</sup> Volker's reports specified that the failings of the program could be attributed not only to the UN Secretariat, but also to the member states of the Security Council and the Security Council's 661 Committee. The fairly even apportionment of blame, however, did not stop the rise in antagonistic sentiment between some members of the US Congress and members of the UN Secretariat.

Nevertheless, the pressure for multilateral action was mounting. As Stewart Patrick writes, "By the spring of 2004 a rare bipartisan consensus had taken hold in Washington: in a world of failed states and terrorist threats, reconstruction and stabilization were no longer optional, peripheral undertakings but rather unavoidable, core missions of foreign and national security policy."<sup>41</sup> And from within the George W. Bush administration, Secretary of State Powell wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* expressing his view of the vital role of multilateral alliances, including the UN.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, from late 2003 through 2004, the UN launched four missions of "substantial size and mandate" in Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire, Burundi, and Haiti, followed in summer 2005 with a vote to create a massive UN African Union

hybrid mission in the Darfur region of Sudan.<sup>43</sup> In April 2004, George W. Bush created the Global Peace Operations Initiative providing \$660 million to train 75,000 peacekeepers throughout the world. In his 21 September 2004 address to the UN General Assembly, Bush said the world “must create permanent capabilities to respond to future crises . . . and more effective means to stabilize regions in turmoil, and to halt religious violence and ethnic cleansing.”

But again, even while President George W. Bush’s own rhetoric and actions became increasingly and unequivocally multilateral, and US-UN relations appeared to be improving quite dramatically, in an unexpectedly unilaterally leaning move, the administration forwarded the nomination of Bolton to become US ambassador to the UN. Bolton was a staunch anti-UN, neoconservative figure. He served at the UN for little over a year on a recess appointment, even though he was never fully appointed to the role, because his nomination was never confirmed by the Senate. Bolton is widely quoted as having said, among other inflammatory remarks, that “there is no such thing as the United Nations. There is only the international community, which can only be led by the only remaining superpower, which is the United States.”<sup>44</sup>

Bolton’s main refrain while he was ambassador was that the UN ought to be reformed. Although he “did not have the knowledge of management in general or the workings of the UN in particular to come up with anything of his own,” he forwarded some interesting and potentially fruitful proposals such as rehabilitating the UN Military Staff Committee “to advise and assist the Security Council on all questions relating to the Security Council’s military requirements.”<sup>45</sup> He helped create a new financial auditing board and an ethics office, adding millions in additional management spending. He was also one of the key negotiators in the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, approving a sizable UN peacekeeping force to oversee the cease-fire. Thus, although he began his term in the far unilateral category, his actions while in office suggest a more moderate unilateral position. However, it is entirely possible that he moved to this position because of instructions from President George W. Bush and not of his own volition.<sup>46</sup>

Soon after appointing Bolton, President Bush restated his increasingly multilateral position during his 2005 address to the General Assembly:

At the start of a new century, the world needs the United Nations to live up to its ideals and fulfill its mission. The founding members of this organization knew that the security of the world would increasingly depend on advancing the rights of mankind, and this would require the work of many hands. After committing America to the idea of the U.N. in 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt declared: “The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man or one party or one nation.” Peace is the responsibility of every nation and every generation.

George W. Bush also engaged in numerous and extensive dialogues with

Secretary-General Annan, helped create the Millennium Challenge Corporation that seeks to implement the Millennium Development Goals, and was instrumental in creating the UN Democracy Fund. Bush exclaimed after a meeting with Annan: "As usual, we had a very constructive dialogue. I always enjoy visiting with the Secretary-General. It gives us a chance to talk about our common interests and our desire for peace and liberty around the world."<sup>47</sup> At that meeting, they reportedly discussed common interests in Darfur, peace in the Middle East and helping Hamas transform itself into a political party, atomic weapons development in Iran, reform of the Secretariat, and reform of the Human Rights Commission. At least in public, Annan and Bush agreed on all these matters.

In sum, although the war in Iraq was largely a unilaterally initiated war, and the George W. Bush administration's unilateralist rhetoric was strong at first, its actions swung between extremes of unilateralism and multilateralism, with a general multilateral trajectory. After the attacks of 9/11, and the difficulties of establishing peace in Iraq, the Bush administration sought the UN's help in postconflict state-building projects around the globe, and pushed forward the largest increases in the UN's peacekeeping activities and budget in history. At the beginning of Bush's first term, there were approximately 35,000 UN peacekeepers in the field but, by the end of his second term, the UN was fielding over 110,000 uniformed peacekeeping troops in seventeen different missions—more than ever before. Between the start and the end of the Bush presidency, the UN's peacekeeping budget almost tripled, to \$7.0 billion, and the administrative budget more than doubled, from \$2.5 billion to \$5.2 billion. Never before in history had the UN's budget increased so quickly. The increased spending flowed "from Bush administration demands for a more ambitious UN role around the world."<sup>48</sup> Overall contrary to common perception, and despite the unilateral rhetoric and war in Iraq, the Bush administration's support for the UN and multilateral peacekeeping initiatives was far greater than that of any other administration since the end of the Cold War.

### Early Trends in the Obama Administration

Before the 2008 presidential election, in a prescient article, Patrick contended that:

the new administration, regardless of party, is likely to pay greater rhetorical homage to multilateralism and the UN, while seeking to preserve policy autonomy [and] minimize US obligations...This will represent not retrenchment so much as sober and pragmatic multilateralism, removed from both the self-righteous fantasies of neoconservatism and the utopian dreams of progressive humanitarian interventionists.<sup>49</sup>

Although the new US ambassador to the UN, Susan E. Rice, is by no means a

utopian, her previous writings suggest an interest in advancing an ambitious US foreign policy agenda through multilateral means. This suggestion, however, has been tempered since Rice joined the Obama administration. Before arriving in office, Ambassador Rice unequivocally stated the far multilateral position in a piece on reducing global poverty as a central US interest. She argued that poverty is the primary source of many transnational threats to the US and the world from civil wars, to terrorism, to international crime, and to climate change. Therefore,

developed countries will need to drop trade distorting subsidies, further open their markets, encourage job-creating foreign and domestic investment, cancel more debt, combat infectious disease, prevent and resolve conflicts, and assist the recovery of post-conflict societies. For the United States to meet this challenge, it will require a near tectonic shift in our national security policy.<sup>50</sup>

Rice also connected her multilateral position to policy advancement through the UN. Upon presenting her credentials to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 26 January 2009, Rice said, "President Obama's view is clear, that our security and well-being can best be advanced in cooperation and in partnership with other nations. There is no more important forum for that effective cooperation than the United Nations."<sup>51</sup> She has also made clear, however, that the problem of failed states, civil wars, and genocide require humanitarian intervention and that, if the "US fails to gain UN support," then it should seek other forums such as NATO to pursue a muscular foreign policy to stop the killing.<sup>52</sup> Most recently, she has firmly expressed the moderate multilateral position: "The United Nations is critically important to our national security because it is the one place that we can marshal with the force of law the commitment of other nations to do things that we need to protect our security."<sup>53</sup> In other words, Rice links UN engagement first to US security.

The moderate multilateral position has become the standard in the current Obama administration, even if there are somewhat conflicting views regarding this position in the president's cabinet. Vice President Joseph Biden has generally supported the UN, especially by seeking to pay US dues. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is generally centrist minded in foreign policy, and has not expressed great ambitions for the UN. Moreover Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, previously of the George W. Bush administration, along with the head of the National Security Council, General Jim Jones, will most likely resist deeper multilateral engagement in general, and specifically through the UN, because both tend to align with the moderate unilateral category.

The tendency toward unilateralism has manifested itself in some ways in policymaking. Since President Obama took office, the UN Security Council has made fewer decisions than at any time since 1991 (during the Cold War, it was not particularly active). Part of the reason, as hypothesized by a Security Council Report, is that, rather than seeking engagement through the UN, the

United States is seeking to pursue issues “bilaterally or in forums outside the Council.”<sup>54</sup> The US military continues to be suspicious of the UN, even while it is training thousands of non-US troops for UN peacekeeping missions and is gaining expertise in postconflict reconstruction. The US Congress also remains wary of the UN.

However, the Obama administration has also vigorously pursued a moderate multilateral agenda to enhance both US and common security interests. Shortly before winning the Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama spoke for the first time at the 2009 General Assembly, and expressed firm support for continued funding and political support for UN peacekeeping operations. In terms of concrete policies, the United States contributed \$2 billion to the UN peacekeeping budget in 2009, paying back all peacekeeping arrears. The United States sought membership on the UN Human Rights Council and won it quickly. In July 2009, President Obama signed the relatively new Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There have also been high-level meetings on a climate change treaty, and a “New START” nuclear arms reduction treaty signed by the United States and Russia. The United States has also vigorously pursued enforcing and strengthening the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty through the UN, especially concerning Iran. President Obama has sought to work increasingly through the UN on a civilian strategy in Afghanistan, where nineteen UN agencies and about 1,500 UN staff (a majority of Afghan nationals) are currently employed.<sup>55</sup> The United States continues to support African Union peacekeeping operations such as the one in Somalia, which the United States has funded to the tune of \$40 million.<sup>56</sup> And while the Obama administration has not gone so far as to advocate for the creation of a UN standing peacekeeping force, it has expressed support “for strengthening and expanding the Standing Police Capacity” in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the administration has tended toward the moderate multilateral position, in both word and deed, when advancing US as well as common security interests through the institutions of the UN.

The US ambivalence toward the UN has deep roots.<sup>58</sup> Every US presidential administration since the end of the Cold War has oscillated between unilateralism and multilateralism, with definite trends toward moderation, but unanticipated US deaths account for the most important sources of change. President Clinton sought to be more multilateral than his predecessor, but was pulled toward the middle of the spectrum after the unanticipated US deaths in Somalia, and even further toward unilateralism during the Kosovo dispute. President George W. Bush sought to forward policies that were more unilateral than President Clinton’s, but was pushed toward multilateralism after the deaths of Americans on 9/11. And contrary to common perception, he proved to be more supportive of the UN in budgetary terms than the other post-Cold War presidents before him. The Obama administration appears to be continu-

ing on the moderate multilateral path and, barring any crises, there is little evidence that the administration will seek to push further in either direction of the unilateral-multilateral continuum. 🌐

## Notes

Lise Morjé Howard is assistant professor in the Department of Government at Georgetown University. She was formerly acting director of UN affairs for the New York City Commission for the United Nations, and director of the Program in Conflict Resolution at Georgetown University. She is the author of *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (2008), which won the 2010 Best Book Award from the Friends of the Academic Council on the United Nations System.

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18. Colin L. Powell, cited in Daalder, "Knowing When to Say No," p. 61.

19. Madeleine K. Albright on the *MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour*, PBS, 30 August 1993, as cited in Ruggie, "Third Try at World Order?" p. 556.

20. Daalder, "Knowing When to Say No," pp. 44–45.

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27. Quoted in Ruggie, "The UN: Bush's Newest Ally?" p. 21.

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